

A Call For End to 'Opaque' Planning

Montgomery Residents Request Clearer Regulations

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Montgomery County must simplify its land use planning rules and put neighborhoods on equal footing with developers if it is going to learn from mistakes made with the troubled Clarksburg Town Center project, neighborhood groups told public officials at a forum yesterday.

Small measures, such as posting information about development proposals on the Internet and holding more public hearings in the evenings when working people can attend, would give residents greater say in how their communities develop, the groups said. The Planning Board should also do a better job of explaining the county's perplexing zoning code and allow more time for the public to rebut developers' comments before voting on a proposal, several community activists suggested.

"The process is very opaque to the average citizen," said Kathleen Michels, president of the Upper Sligo Civic Association and Friends of Sligo Creek. "The developers know exactly where to go and whom to talk to."

County Council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), who organized the forum attended by more than 100 people at the Johns Hopkins University campus in Rockville, said she wanted to hear suggestions for making the county's planning process more reliable and accountable. The crowd included current and former planning officials, politicians and activists. The Clarksburg Town Center controversy "really hit a nerve in Montgomery County," Floreen said.

More public involvement, many at the forum said, could help avoid the kinds of construction irregularities plaguing the town center in Clarksburg, a community being developed northeast of Germantown.

Residents have complained that the area is not being built as promised, leaving them with inadequate parkland, narrow streets and homes that are too close together and too tall. The county's Department of Park and Planning has recommended that \$2.11 million in fines be levied against the developer and builders. The state special prosecutor and the county's independent inspector general are investigating whether laws were broken.

Several people said they found the maligned Planning Board staff to be responsive and helpful. However, they said, the development application process seemed designed to serve the needs of politically influential developers rather than the people who will live near their new shopping centers and subdivisions.

Nadine Mort, an Ashton resident, said her community was surprised to learn about a shopping center being proposed for a historic area of Ashton and Sandy Spring. She suggested that Park and Planning send e-mail alerts to residents about nearby development applications.

"There's a perception that citizens are on the outside and can't really participate," Mort said.

The first half of the meeting focused on a panel discussion among land use experts, former county planning officials and civic activists about the changing issues Montgomery must grapple with. The county, they said, faces new challenges as it transforms from a sprawling suburb with large swaths of farmland into an urban county with little vacant land and more demand for redeveloping smaller areas in dense communities.

The discussion was mostly academic until the community activists got a chance to ask questions. Why do new houses and strip malls often get built without the new roads and schools needed to accommodate them? several people asked. Why does the county spend years carefully crafting a Master Plan only to have it seem to constantly change through zoning amendments? Why, two people asked, does the county's Department of Permitting Services, which is responsible for enforcing development and construction standards, have a reputation among residents as "Keystone Kops"?

Planning Board Chairman Derick P. Berlage said he had enacted several of the suggestions he heard yesterday, including requiring developers to meet with affected community members before submitting their applications. He said he would ask the board to consider other suggestions, including extending public comment periods on development proposals.